BORDERING BINARITIES AND COGNITIVE CARTOGRAPHY: WHAT ON EARTH DOES LITERATURE HAVE TO DO WITH BORDER TRANSACTIONS?

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Abstract

Although literature and poetry have numerous borders of their own, these are rarely assumed to have any significance for the world outside the text itself. A number of reasons for this distinctive division certainly stem from the literary field itself. This paper intends to indicate the exclusivist stance of some theories of literature, and the inclucivist of others, before exploring the possibilities of bridging between borders in text and territory by reference to the life and literature of Oscar Wilde and a performative and imaginative analysis of Paul Muldoon's epigrammatic poem "The Plot".

One of the many incidents in crossing the borders of life and literature occurred when Oscar Wilde embarked on his much celebrated lecture tour in America in 1882. When being questioned about illegal baggage by the officers at Customs Control in New York, he, supposedly, responded with one of his many admirable aphorisms: "I have nothing to declare, except my genius".[1] Although Wilde passed the Customs Control with impunity, his remark reveals an astute awareness of the position of genius, arts and aesthetics as a distinct sphere beyond the realm of state control. Art, literature and poetry are not only suspicious to defenders of the realm, they are frequently excluded from philosophies of social construction too. Marx's historical materialism, for example, leaves little space for the dimension of art. As an extreme example of repulsion against art by a state official let us, for the fun of it, quote the infamous line from the Nazi Poet Laureate Hanns Johs, frequently attributed to Herman Goering:

[1] Where do you place the boundaries of literature and life, fiction and truth? Although the quoted witticism is widely attributed to the master of aphorism, and entirely within his spirit, no sure evidence exists that Wilde ever uttered this remark. The first known reference to the famous quip occurs in Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912), 64.

"Whenever I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun".[2] If arts have frequently, at least before the recent "cultural turn" and mode of New Historicism[3], been excluded from social engineering and historical research, than, undoubtedly, particularly in the case of literature, the movements and theories of literature are largely responsible themselves for its distance to processes of civilization.

Despite the recent orientation towards interdisciplinarity, literature and the arts are frequently separated from other sciences and social construction. In the condemnation of cultural hermeneutics the Sokal-affair of the mid-nineties recirculated much of the disciplinary dichotomization in the culture wars of the late fifties and early sixties.[4] Perhaps such a schism between the social and the literary started with the famous denigration of the arts and the banishment of poets in Plato´s philosophy and was reinforced with the Aristotelean divisions of knowledge. Throughout Plato's philosophy literature and the arts

[2] The line, "When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun", often associated with Nazi leaders, derives from the first scene of act one in Hanns Johst, *Schlageter* (Munchen: Langen und Muller, 1933). The original line is slightly different: "Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meinen Browning," "Whenever I hear of culture... I release the safety-catch of my Browning!"

[3] The cultural turn describes developments in the humanities and the social sciences brought about by various developments across the disciplines. The term ensues from Richard Rorty's exposition of the linguistic turn in philosophy under the aegis of Saussure and Wittgenstein in the earlier twentieth century and describes a shift in emphasis towards meaning and on culture rather than politics or economics. For a paradigmatic introductory text, see Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (London; New York: Verso, 1998). New Historicism is a Foucauldian legacy of epistemological research that includes a wider array of source materials – literature, letters, arts – in its endeavours to expand our limited conceptualisations of the past. These ideas bear heavily on Hayden White's historical research and on Stephen Greenblatt's uncovering of the historical contexts and intellectual history in the works of Shakespeare. See Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

[4] In their anti-poststructuralist stunt Sokal and Bricmont raise a number of pertinent critical issues with a number of humanist scholars. Their suggested answers reveal a mindset trained by nature science and disclose profound lack of knowledge in the disciplines of humanities. Alan D. Sokal and J. Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (London: Profile Books, 1998). C. P. Snow measured the gap between nature and humanist scientists and categorized the latter group as natural Luddites who purport a tragic view of life and oppose technological progress. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

are always relegated to a tertiary status, subordinate to ideal form and actual object. *Phaedrus* condemns writing in general as alien to inner truth and individual memory. *Ion* presents poets as persons driven by divine madness. Poetry, if allowed at all in *The Republic*, is to be severely censored. Plato´s philosophical propagation of writers and artists as liars, lunatics and libertines contributed significantly to their historical fate as suspiciously apolitical, asocial and amoral deviants. If Plato´s meditations, however, despite their reservations about artists, served the matters of the soul and the spirit and examined the ideas of thinking, Aristotle's intellectual endeavors prioritized the empiricism of natural research and the logics of structured thinking. Undoubtedly, the emphasis of his projects and his systematic classifications of knowledge propelled disciplinary divisions and specializations. Montaigne's and Luther's insistence on individual mediations and text reading outside the hierarchies of state and church institutions also had repercussions for the severance of text interpretation from a larger context. In the twentieth century, forces of such a fissure accumulate. Despite the socio-political motivation of Russian socialist art and Italian futurism, the modernist debacle of *mimesis*, the tenets of art for art's sake and the concomitant insistence on anti-referential art reinforced the distancing of art from any social, historical or religious context. This dislocation of art from larger contexts was fuelled by Freudian interiorization, Adorno's advocacy of artistic autonomy, I. A. Richards' insistence on the uniqueness of literary language and, not least, by the avalanche of structuralism in the wake of Saussure´s semiology.[5] Linda Hutcheon´s *Narcissistic Narratives* captures concisely the final stage of this self-introverted development of literary art.[6]

To state that art, to a large extent, has distanced itself from direct proximity with society, is not to deprive art of any essential function in

[5] For two of the many texts on pure aestheticism, see *The Art of Lying* and the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. *Oscar Wilde, Collected Works of Oscar Wilde (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 3, 919-45.* Theodor W. Adorno et al., *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). Saussure's structural semiology had a great impact on humanist research such as anthropology, literature and linguistics. Ferdinand de Saussure et al., *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Duckworth, 1983), Claude Levi-Strauss and Monique Layton, *Structural Anthropology* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957).

[6] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* (New York; London: Methuen, 1984).

the formation of social futures. On the contrary. Nobody doubts the political impact of the Russian Formalists, for example, and art and literature often guard the subtle boundaries between state interests and individual concerns.[7] That creative arts can be challenging to the formation and future of states and nations, is a lesson Wilde would have learnt from Plato's philosophy, from the Irish tradition of anti-English rebel songs, from the secular undercurrent of anti-clerical verse and from the seditious idealism of Romantic poets such as Shelly. In the manner that Wilde put his genius into his life and only his talent into his works, his extravagant dandyism and flamboyant homosexuality could be seen as a further opposition to natural order, church orthodoxy and state law. In his life and literature the versatile author of such short-stories, poems, plays, novels and essays as "The Happy Prince" and "The Canterville Ghost", *The Ballad of Reading Jail*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" and "The Decay of Lying" keeps crossing the geographical, and more importantly, the conceptual borders between Ireland, England, the USA and the Continent. He also displays his literary sensibility across generic divisions, defies ordinary gender constructions, confuses the distinctions of life and art and continuously defines and recontextualizes the limits and laws of the aesthetic itself. Finally, his art and life inspect with wit and flair the situation of the individual under the yoke of moralism, the imperatives of social morass and the letter of the law.

One of the many implications of Wilde´s witty quip at the Customs is the unpopularity of imaginative arts to the authorities of state control. In this respect, Wilde´s entertaining remark corresponds in a comedic fashion to the emphasis of Foucault and Derrida on the transgressive qualities of imaginative writing and founders of discursivity. Foucault argues:

> Speeches and books were assigned real authors, other than mythical or important religious figures, only when the

[7] The Russian Formalists were a group of very influential literary critics, Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson among them, in Russia from 1910 onwards. Under Stalin Russian Formalism became a pejorative term for elitist art. In the thirties, many of the Russian Formalists were driven into exile due to political disapproval. Humanities often concern themselves with the dilemmas of the individual - moral, spiritual and identitarian ones – and exceptions to rule, whereas natural and social sciences often formulate regularity and law.

> author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his discourse was considered transgresssive. In our culture – undoubtedly in others as well – discourse was not originally a thing, a product, or a possession, but an action situated in a bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous. It was a gesture charged with risk long before it became a possession caught in a circuit of property values. But it was at the moment when a system of ownership and strict copyright rules were established (toward the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth century) that the transgressive properties always intrinsic to the act of writing became the forceful imperative of literature.[8]

The critique of the capitalist system, religious orthodoxy and restrictive jurisprudence is as evident in Foucalt´s exposition as is the Romantic impulse of radical subversion by indomitable individuality. This transgressive view of literature constitutes a veritable annulment of New Criticism. New critics held a sacrosanct view of literature and venerated the values of status quo. Poetry, I. A. Richards concludes in *Science and Poetry*, is "capable of saving us".[9] F. R. Leavis bases his evaluation of modern literature on conservation. Richards did not regard Wilde as a savior and Leavis did not include him in *The Great Tradition*.[10] But Wilde would probably have recognized Foucault´s philosophical disposition. In his aesthetic extremism and repulsion for mundane rationality and habitual moralism, Wilde opposed the utilitarian thinking, philistine culture and moral paradigms of late Victorian England and Catholic Ireland.

Another vital consequence of Foucault's essay, "What is an Author?", is its heuristic resuscitation of the deconstructed author, as a response to Roland Barthes´ peremptory annunciation of his demise in "Death of the Author".[11] Whereas Barthes excluded totally the institution of the author in the act of interpreteation, Foucault interrogates

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[8] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticsim*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 1628.
[9] I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1926), 82.
[10] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948).
[11] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 142-49.

what is meant by an author, delineates the hermeneutic possibilities created by his absence and speculates on how what aspects of the idea of an author might activate specific features of a given text.

Foucault´s discursive explorations of the deconstructed author also argues against the structuralist linguisticization of literature. Structuralist interpretations of literature focused exclusively on its grammatical structures and linguistic phenomena; they severed the interpretation of the text not only from the author, but also from historical perspectives and social conditions.[12] To regard literature as a closed body of grammatical structures and internal linguistic phenomena is extremely reductive. After all, one is rarely attracted by the skeleton of a beautiful lady. Wilde´s writing would loose a dimension if we deprived ourselves of the personal panache of the man in the arts. So would the works of Shakespeare and the literature of Thomas Pynchon, precisely because the lack of bibliographical information spurs imaginative interpretations and controversy.

The American Customs proved a liberal and benign institution to Oscar Wilde compared to how the Irish Censorship of Publications Act treated artists in the new independent Republic of Ireland. Ruled by the catechisms of Catholic religion and the political concerns to keep the newly founded Republic of Ireland protected against the development of modernity – normally rubricated as immorality and materialism in Ireland – the Irish Board of Censorship confirms Foucault's horror vision of totalitarian state suppression. The Board banned more than 5000 books from 1929 to 1967. The international list of literary anathema included such works as *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Greene and authors such as Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Graves, Ernest Hemingway, D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Thomas Mann, Somerset Maugham and Evelyn Waugh. Irish writers who were censored included Austin Clarke, Benedict Kiely, Kate O'Brien, Frank O'Connor and Seán Ó Faoláin. One might say that the long list of

[12] A. J. Greimas' approach to literature offers an illuminating example of the flaws of structuralist approaches to literature. In *Structural Semantics* he offers six chapters of linguistic analysis before the final section presents a language-derived interpretation of Bernao's literature. Greimas' rectangle, also known as the semiotic square, epitomizes the linguistic cynosure and reductionism of structuralism. Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

books banned by the Irish Censorship of Publications Act offers the best index to the great works of modernist literature. In 1950, Robert Graves described the Irish censorship laws as "the fiercest literary censorship this side of the Iron Curtain."[13] Obviously, Graves´ comparison is overstated. Russians writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Osip Mandelstam and the late Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn did not only have their work censored, they also suffered persecution, deportation and imprisonment. History holds uncountable examples of similar state suppression of writers, and in our contemporary world the infamous fatwa against Salman Rushdie and the International Pen Organization prove that writers still operate as the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Within the poststructuralist regime of decomposing the distinct divisions between the text and its contexts, Derrida corroborates Foucault´s view of literature as a law onto itself that discloses and interacts with other law systems. In "Before the Law", his philosophical meditations on Kafka´s famous novel *The Trial*, Derrida pits literature against religious law, natural law, Kant´s categorical imperative and Freudian psychoanalysis. He asserts:

> Perhaps literature has come to occupy, under historical conditions that are not merely linguistic, a position that is always open to a kind of subversive juridicity. It would have occupied this place for some time, without itself being wholly subversive, indeed often the contrary. This subversive juridicity requires that self-identity never be assured, nor reassuring, and it supposes also a power to produce performatively the statements of the law, of the law that literature can be, and not just of the law to which literature submits. Thus literature itself makes law, emerging in that place where the law is made. Therefore, under certain determined conditions, it can exercise the legislative power of linguistic performativity to sidestep existing laws from which, however, it derives protection and receives its conditions of emergence.[14]

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[13] For Graves' comment and an overview of state censorship of the arts in Ireland, see Brian P. Kennedy, *Dreams and Responsibilities: The State and the Arts in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: The Arts Council, 1990).

[14] Derrida contemplates the many laws of literature per se and the inextricable lines of literature, life and death in many texts. Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 181-221; "The

If Wilde´s fusion of literature and life, his many desiring selves, his report from the dehumanizing effects of incarceration, and his sensitivity to language to a certain extent anticipates Foucault's investigations into the institutions of authorship, sexuality, prisons and the power of discourse, Paul Muldoon activates many of Derrida´s controversial ideas. Due to his Wildean cultural versatility and obdurate poetics, the Irish-Anglo-American Princeton professor of creative writing was commissioned by Reading Council to mark the centenary of Oscar Wilde's death on November 30, 1900. The text of Muldoon´s "The Gate" is now incorporated into the new wrought-iron Oscar Wilde gates on a path near the former prison.[15]

Undoubtedly, Wilde's wit and relentless antics bear upon Paul Muldoon's "The Plot", as do Derrida´s discussions of the laws of life and literature and the archetypal Derridean legacy of deconstruction:

The Plot
He said, my pretty dear maid, if it is as you say,
I'll do my best endeavours in cutting of your hay,
For in your lovely countenance I never saw a frown,
So my lovely lass, I'll cut your grass, that's ne'er been trampled down.
Traditional ballad

a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a
l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l
f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f
a l f a a l f a
l f a l l f a l
f a l f f a l f
a l f a a l p h a a l f a

Law of Genre," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 221-53; "Living On: Borderlines," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. (New York: Continuum, 1979), 75-177.

[15] Although the multi-prize winning and former Oxford professor of Poetry Paul Muldoon has by now proved successful, not unlike Wilde, as a children's writer, playwright, librettist, literary critic, editor, translator and rock writer for Warren Zevon, his prominent position as a writer is still mainly due to his poetic élan. For his poem on Wilde, see "Two Stabs at Oscar". Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 65.

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  l f a l                         l f a l
f a l f                         f a l f
a l f a                     a l f a
l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l
f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f
a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a l f a
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[16]

In its artificial construction of two distinctive counterparts that disintegrate and intersect on closer inspection, the poem provides a serioludic showcase of Derridean deconstruction. The French philosopher's linguistic destabilisation and semiotic freeplay are anticipated in the title that plays on the different meanings of narrative structure, patch of land, political conspiracy and graphic representation. Derrida's attention to the materiality of writing and the expanded concept of text are configured in the graphic letterbox. The many semantic twists caused by the cancellation of phonetic and written difference allude to Derrida's philosophical ambush on the phallogocentric constitution of western thinking.

At first sight and sound these two textual stanzas appear as two very different opponents. The first segment of this text depicts the lie of the Romantic land and organicist erotics, and, thus, appears as the end of an implicit narrative on natural beauty in the common language of the ordinary people. The balladic form ensures the popular address of a Rousseauiste celebration of the rural and natural. These traditional Romantic verses appear in stark contrast to the succeeding scientific matrix.

As a second stanza the alphabetic square questions the ballad form and most forms of conventional poetry. The letter distribution of this quod is only arrested by arbitrary imposition, and the infinite repetition of alfalfa defies the poetic practice of syntactical composition and metric scansion. The morphological atomisation attracts attention to the single letter and the formation of various words depends on alternating semiotic structures: a, al, alf, fa, la, fal, laf, alfalfa. There is an obvious joke here in contrasting an organicist and a concrete poem in a volume of poetry entitled *Hay*. The second stanza obviously violates many laws of literature. Is this a poem, you might ask. The alphabetic atomism and clear cut square also performs Derrida´s

[16] Muldoon, *Hay* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1998), 15.

questioning of the inside and outside of a text, the beginning and end of a text, and the play on the letter a that creates the point of departure for Derrida´s concept of *difference*.

In "The Plot" the fluidity of organicist poetics and the growth of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* are combined in a haybox of Derridean writing. The two textual entities in this binary structure disintegrate and overlap. If unknown origin is one of the criteria for a traditional ballad, this does not exclude a mischievous Muldoon as the author. These authorial ambivalences fit Foucault´s deconstructions of the author institution. The claim for tradition and authenticity in the textual body on top is undermined by the self-conscious play on a roll in the hay, and the phrase "best endeavour" suggests a modern terminology that is anachronistic to Romantic sensibility. In this case Muldoon plays upon the tradition of MacPherson's Ossian forgeries, Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* and Douglas Hyde's translations in *Love Songs of Connacht*. As a transcription of a transcription with no original, Muldoon submits his simulacrum to the long tradition of fakelore.

Conversely the novelty of the magic letterbox is only meretricious as such a pattern poem belongs to a tradition that runs at least from Callimachus' epigrammatic reactions to the Homeric epic via Herbert's "shaped verses" to Apollinairean calligrammes and Gomringer's concrete poetry, "silencio" in particular.

The internal dissolution of the two poetic entities facilitates interrelations. In the letter box the word alpha suggests a whole periodic system of science from linguistics to chemistry, physics and mathematics in its connotations of alphabet, alpha rays, alpha particles, alpha waves and alphanumerals. Most of these sciences are termed natural sciences and therefore connect with the natural story and beauty of organicist philosophy. The generic grass in the rustic description meets its specification in the hay type alfalfa. Whereas the traditional simulacrum suggests a plot, a narrative structure, the pattern stanza configures a visual plot. Just as the romantic story does not reveal the end, the magic square contains numerous alfas with no omegas. The romantic defloration and fall from grace in the romantic verses appear in the visualisation of the lost letter in fal, that also, of course alludes to the season of harvesting the hay.

As a serioludic poetic showpiece of Derrida´s philosophical interrogations of law, his linguistic imperative and his ideas of deconstruction and *differance*, Muldoon's plotting suggests several contextual repercussions. Obviously, the poem performs the laws of literary tradition, primarily the ones of Romantic ballads and concrete poetry. In its irreverent playfulness it also opposes expectations of poetic sincerity. But this law-opposing juridicity also comments upon the immediate social conditions from which the poem crystalizes. Northern Ireland, well-known for its rigorous binarities of Republican/Nationalist/Catholic and Loyalist/Unionist/Protestant, is one of this poem's primary contexts. In this context, the poem represents on a formal level a dissolution of the many geographical, historical, social and conceptual divisions of the conflict. Even such a fierce critic of postmodernism as Terry Eagleton admits with specific reference to Northern Ireland the political potential of deconstruction to conceptual binarism and divided societies:

> Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in some ways confront each other as alien and fear the dissolution of their own cultural identities by the contamination of the other. This is the aspect of the situation which postmodernism is good at grasping, but usually the only aspect.[17]

The poem also performs Derrida´s philosophy. If "The Plot" is conceived under Derridean insemination, it certainly also gives birth to severe critique. The poem's alphabetic excesses, text parasitism and reduction of the principles of deconstruction to a playful poem disclose many of the simplicities at the core of his intellectual extravaganza.

Nevertheless, what can we possibly learn from Muldoon´s games with the boundaries of language, literature form and ideas? I suggest that some of the lessons are: Most borders are cognitive constructions and not natural formations. They are arbitrary. They are mutable. They often efface the long traditions and history from which they stem. These traditions and histories are plural, contingent and discontinuous, more than monological, original and linear. The construction of borders frequently elides similarities, emphasizes differ-

[17] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 127.

ences and undermines subtleties and indirect exchange. Simplistic conceptualizations of borders frequently stem from, and reinforce, Hegelian dialectics and dichotomization. In their poetry and philosophy Paul Muldoon and Jacques Derrida oppose the cognitive operations of binary confrontation and disseminates the concept of border as only two different logics of a limited space that engender the dynamics of limitation and transgression, unification and dissociation. Such binary logics and dialectic constructions are conflictual in themselves in their reduction of diversity and cementation of dominant ideology and social malformations.

In 1887, five years after his tour in America, Oscar Wilde wrote: "We have really everything in common with America nowadays, except of course, language."[18] This ironic inversion of conventional judgment indicates a liberation of unstated similarities at the cost of binary reductionism. In their art and life Oscar Wilde and Paul Muldoon oppose the laws of convention and society, refract bordering binarities and remap the cognitive cartography of their place and time. The theories of text of Foucault and Derrida vitalize the significance of these two authors. Similarly, both of the poststructuralist thinkers emphasize the performative powers of literature and reintroduce the significance of contextuality. If so many theories from New Criticism to Russian Formalism and Structuralism regard literature as a closed system, a ship in a bottle or a kaleidoscope, the approaches of Foucault and Derrida to literature shatter the glass and put writing in touch with a larger horizon.

[18] Wilde, *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, 192.